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FEATURED

Claims, counterclaims fly before uranium mining hearings

Waste in focus as big week looms for Edgemont proposal

Seth Tupper
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The Powertech Uranium Project building sits on the north end of Main Street in Edgemont. The Environmental Protection Agency is holding hearings about the mining proposal this week.

Journal file

Seth Tupper

Opponents of a proposed uranium mine near Edgemont claimed prior to this week's public hearings on the project that waste fluid from other mines will be disposed of there, while a mining company spokesman denied the claim and a federal agency called it a possibility.

The unverified claim, and subsequent adamant denial, illustrate the rising tensions as the proposal to mine for uranium in the southern Black Hills moves closer to possibly being permitted after a years-long process.

A **video posted to Facebook** by a South Dakota-based nonprofit, the Council for Responsible Mining, includes a narrator saying that if the mine is permitted, the mining company will bring in waste from other mines.

“They want to haul in waste from other states and possibly even other countries to permanently inject it right into our water,” the narrator says in the video.

The video is part of a campaign by opponents of the mining proposal to encourage attendance at federal regulatory hearings Monday and Tuesday in Rapid City, Wednesday in Hot Springs and Thursday in Edgemont.

Gardner Gray of rural Pringle, chairman of the **Council for Responsible Mining**, admitted in a Journal phone interview that he has no direct knowledge of a plan by the mining company, Powertech, to bring other companies' waste fluid to the mining site.

“I haven’t heard it from them, but I have heard it,” Gray said.

Gray referenced uranium prices, which were \$50 to \$60 per pound five years ago but are now \$20 to \$30 per pound. He predicted Powertech will not mine uranium if prices stay so low but will instead seek revenue by accepting and injecting waste fluid from other mines at the Edgemont-area site.

Mark Hollenbeck, an Edgemont-area rancher and project director for Powertech, spoke with the Journal by phone and denied the claim by the Council for Responsible Mining.

“That is absolutely false,” he said.

Hollenbeck said Powertech — a U.S. division of the global **Azarga Uranium Corp.** — does not plan to accept waste fluid from other mines. But even if it did, Hollenbeck said, other mines already have their own disposal permits and would have no economic incentive to haul their waste to the Edgemont-area site.

Powertech has received **two draft permits** from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, including one that would allow the company to inject mining waste fluid underground. According to the EPA, the permit would not restrict Powertech from bringing in waste fluid from other mines.

The waste-disposal issue and others will be aired this week as the EPA conducts 28 hours of public hearings on the draft permits before issuing a final decision sometime after May 19. This week's hearings will be from 1 p.m. to 8 p.m. each day — Monday and Tuesday at the Best Western Ramkota Hotel in Rapid City, Wednesday at the Mueller Center in Hot Springs, and Thursday at St. James Catholic Church in Edgemont.

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During the first hour of each hearing, EPA officials will be available to meet individually with members of the public and answer questions. The EPA officials will then make a brief technical presentation and open the hearing to public comments. Attendees who wish to speak will be asked to sign up and speak in the order of the sign-up sheet.

The first hearing was April 27 in Valentine, Neb., and drew about 50 people. The EPA located the meeting there to accommodate residents of Native American reservations in South Dakota and Nebraska.

The proposed mine location is in a sparsely populated area 13 miles northwest of Edgemont, near the old Dewey and Burdock townships along the southwestern edge of the Black Hills. Instead of extracting uranium-bearing ore with traditional pit and tunnel mining, which was conducted extensively in the Edgemont area from the 1950s to the 1970s, Powertech wants to use a method known as “in situ” — a Latin phrase meaning “in its place.”

The company would capture underground water, mix it with oxygen and carbon dioxide, and inject the solution into underground ore bodies to loosen deposits of uranium.

The uranium-bearing solution would then be pumped to the surface, where the uranium would be removed and dried into yellowcake for eventual refinement and use in nuclear power plants. The water-based solution would be reused until all the uranium at the well site is extracted. The solution would then be treated and disposed of by injecting it into a deep underground body of water known as an aquifer.

A similar system is now operating near Crawford, Neb., about 120 miles due south of Rapid City.

The Council for Responsible Mining video describes the waste fluid as toxic and radioactive. Hollenbeck, of Powertech, said regulations require the waste fluid to be treated and made safe before it is injected underground.

"It's basically saltwater," Hollenbeck said.

Powertech acquired its Edgemont-area mining rights in 2006 and has been attempting to begin mining ever since. It already has a license from the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission. If Powertech's EPA permits are finalized, the company would still need additional permits — including from the state of South Dakota — to begin mining.

One of the EPA permits would allow Powertech to drill as many production wells as the company desires — potentially 4,000 of them, according to one EPA document — within 14 designated well fields. The production wells would go hundreds of feet underground into the Inyan Kara formation of aquifers.

The other EPA permit would allow Powertech to drill up to four disposal wells, from 1,615 to 2,540 feet underground in the Minnelusa formation of aquifers. The Council for Responsible Mining has claimed that Powertech is seeking eight disposal wells. That was originally true, but Powertech has since withdrawn its request for four of the disposal wells, leaving only the remaining four wells in the draft EPA permits.

The EPA is also proposing to exempt the portion of the Inyan Kara aquifer in the project area from the Safe Drinking Water Act, which is necessary for mining to occur there.

Critics of the project say the mining solution and the injected waste fluid could migrate and contaminate other underground water sources.

“No money is worth that,” Gray said. “If we don’t have water, we don’t exist down here.”

Hollenbeck said Powertech’s project is environmentally sound, and while he will attend this week’s hearings, he does not plan to comment orally and instead plans to submit written comments prior to the EPA’s May 19 deadline.

Contact Seth Tupper at seth.tupper@rapidcityjournal.com

Hearing schedule

This week’s schedule for public EPA hearings on two permits for a proposed in situ uranium mine near Edgemont:

- Monday and Tuesday, 1 to 8 p.m. (with a break from 5 to 6 p.m.), Best Western Ramkota Hotel, 2111 N. LaCrosse St., Rapid City.

- Wednesday, 1 to 8 p.m. (with a break from 5 to 6 p.m.), Mueller Center, 801 S. Sixth St., Hot Springs.
- Thursday, 1 to 8 p.m. (with a break from 5 to 6 p.m.), St. James Catholic Church, 310 Third Ave., Edgemont.

Written comments may be submitted by midnight May 19 to Valois Shea by email, shea.valois@epa.gov; fax, (303) 312-6741; or mail, U.S. EPA Region 8 Mail Code: 8WP-SUI, 1595 Wynkoop St., Denver, CO, 80202-1129.

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Seth Tupper

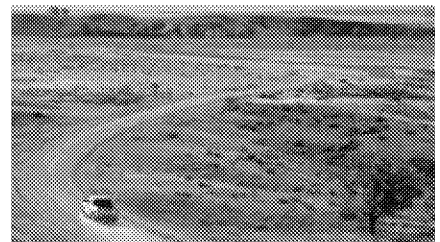
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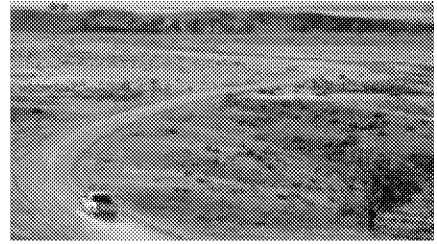
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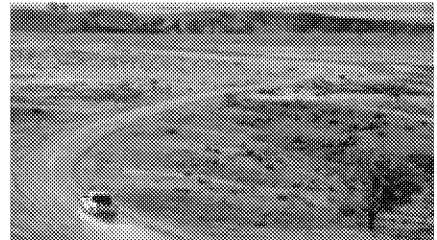
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